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# Newtown Cultural Precinct driving tourism led urban regeneration within the Johannesburg inner-city

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## Abstract

Urban tourism is a growing sector of the tourism market as a result many large cities in developed and developing countries have adopted tourism-led approaches to urban regeneration. Urban regeneration has the potential to produce economic benefits, improve physical environment, inner-city image and the welfare of city residents. Urban and cultural tourism are perceived as powerful tools in urban regeneration and transformation and now form part of local and regional economic development strategies of many major cities across South Africa including Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban, Port Elizabeth, East London and Bloemfontein. The focus of the study was to explore the role of Newtown Cultural Precinct as a tool for urban regeneration, local economic growth and increasing tourist flows to the Johannesburg inner-city. The results of the study reveal that Newtown Cultural Precinct serves as a '*catalyst*' for urban regeneration and shows great potential in stimulating local economic growth and attracting a greater number of visitors into the Johannesburg inner-city. Newtown Cultural Precinct is reaping some of the benefits of urban regeneration by turning Newtown into a safe, secure, vibrant and friendly environment, improving the social dimensions of city residents, creating easy access into Newtown as well as promoting a positive image of the Johannesburg inner city.

**Keywords:** urban tourism, urban regeneration, cultural tourism, tourist experience, renewal

## INTRODUCTION

Urban Tourism (UT) has emerged as a significant and distinctive field of study during the 1990's (Pearce, 2001). Urban Tourism is not a new phenomenon, however, Murphy and Boyle (2005:111) argued that what is 'new' about UT is that "cities that have not traditionally been seen as tourist destinations or 'classic cities' are emerging as urban tourism destinations". In the last decade interest in and research on UT has increased. Ashworth and Page (2010) argue that despite the increase of research studies on UT, the phenomenon of UT remains imprecisely understood and the

literature is still limited. However, UT has the potential of driving urban regeneration such as economic, socio-cultural and physical development and to build a strong inner-city image (Law, 1993; McCarthy, 1998).

The role that culture and tourism can play in the economic development, physical improvement, social and symbolic transformation of urban spaces is significant. Tourism has been adopted as a tool for urban regeneration, and is seen as an important contributor towards economic development and job creation in metropolitan cities across the world. The adoption of cultural regeneration as an

urban regeneration strategy has since become a major phenomenon in the past two decades as many cities, across Western Europe and North America, have looked to the potential role of cultural tourism in urban economic development, transformation of inner-city and improvement of physical environment. Many large cities such as Madrid, Detroit, Leeds, Johannesburg, Glasgow and Rotterdam have adopted a tourism-led approach to urban economic regeneration with the intention of securing potential economic benefits, improved city image and a quality way of life for residents (McCarthy & Pollock, 1997; McCarthy, 1998; 2002; Orueta, 2007).

Furthermore, the reason for embracing tourism-based activities as urban regeneration strategy is affirmed by Law (1993) indicating that large cities are considered travel destinations due to the geographical location, urban development and major clusters of primary and secondary tourist attractions. In recent years, urban areas are being marketed as places of consumption rather than places of production because of the recognition of tourism-based activities as a potential contributor to the economic development. Culture has been utilised as a means of social and economic regeneration. The purpose of this study is to explore the role Newtown Cultural Precinct (NCP) plays as a tool for urban regeneration through increasing economic growth and attracting regular flows of visitors to the Johannesburg inner city.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Urban Tourism (UT) has become an important focus of research in developed and developing countries and it can be a "vital force in inner-city redevelopment and revitalisation" (Keyser, 2002:270). Urban tourism is the only type of tourism product that is stable throughout the year as it involves various types of UT products. Tourism-based activities offer large cities numerous advantages. Tourism is perceived

as a growth industry and many large cities have adopted tourism as an economic strategy. The growth of tourism in large cities has been escalated by the increase in demand from the tourists for urban attractions (Law, 1993; Page, 1995; Ashworth & Page, 2010).

Urban regeneration has become a major topic for urban strategy and economic development over the last three decades (Page & Connel, 2010). Several large cities across the world have implemented urban regeneration projects and programmes for economic development, promotion of tourism products, infrastructure and physical improvement (McCarthy, 2002; Bradley, Hall & Harrison, 2002; Rogerson & Kaplan, 2005).

There are many potential benefits associated with cultural-based urban regeneration projects. Among the prestigious benefits are the direct or indirect effects on job creation, improved quality of life for local residents and economic development (Page, 1995; Shin, 2010), improving city image, attract public-private investors (McCarthy, 1998), improved physical environment (Van der Merwe & Patel, 2005) and it tends to attract new businesses and industries (Rogerson, 2006). The cultural regeneration process commonly "forms part of broader urban regeneration strategies" (Shin, 2010:406). Culture-based urban regeneration has not progressed without criticism. The study by Foley and McPherson (2007) of 'Glasgow's Winter Festival' provide a good practical example of a culture-led urban regeneration strategy. The findings indicate that the 'Glasgow Winter Festival' created several jobs opportunities for the local people, to some, the Winter Festival was a lost opportunity for Glasgow to demonstrate its multicultural values through a cultural. Foley and McPherson (2007:155) suggested that the 'Glasgow Winter Festival' could have "provided a balance of benefit for power sharing, tourists, business and the local population". This discussion illustrates the

valuable role that urban and cultural tourism can play in the regeneration and revitalization of the inner city.

## THE STUDY AREA

The Newtown Cultural Precinct (NCP) is situated in the Johannesburg inner-city and originally started out as a racially mixed working class district where bricks were manufactured in the late 1890s. Today Newtown is distinctively known as a place where 'it's always happening' and as a 'cultural hub' of Johannesburg inner city. The Greater Johannesburg Metropolitan Council (GJMC) and other partners are promoting Newtown as a hub for creative and cultural activities in order to enhance the area's tourism potential. The vision of the Greater Newtown project is to ensure that Newtown "becomes the creative capital of Johannesburg and South Africa: dynamic, vibrant, sophisticated, and cosmopolitan, boasting the best cultural offering in Africa" (Blue IQ, 2012:47).

Newtown Cultural Precinct possesses a wide range of cultural organizations and heritage landmarks, performance and entertainment centers, visitor attractions and shopping malls (NMD, 2012). Today, Newtown has been turned into a safe, vibrant, clean and friendly environment. Rogerson (2006: 85) states that "the Newtown project is of critical importance for the inner-city economic regeneration of Johannesburg". The area offers a magnificent and unique political history from the struggle against apartheid to the road to democracy and building a new South Africa.

## METHODOLOGY

This investigation employed an exploratory sequential mixed method design to achieve the aim and objectives of the study. The Exploratory Sequential research design is a two-phase mixed method approach that involves the collection and analysis of qualitative (first phase) and quantitative

(second phase) data. Purposive or purposeful sampling method was used for qualitative phase of the study. The four selected stakeholders of Newtown were the City of Johannesburg directorates of Art, culture and heritage service, Blue IQ, Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) and Newtown Management District (also known as Newtown Improvement District). Random sampling was used for the quantitative phase of the study. The sampled population was domestic and international travelers visiting attractions or attending events in Newtown. During the first phase qualitative data was collected by means of face-to-face semi-structured interviews. A voice tape recorder was used as a tool for recording interview conversations with the various stakeholders of Newtown. The researchers also made written notes during interviews. In the second phase quantitative data was collected by means of survey research employing questionnaires. In total 110 questionnaires were distributed of which 100 questionnaires were usable.

## Discussion and integration of the results

According to McCarthy (1998); Jansen-Verbeke and Lievois (1999) and Hughes (1999), the promotion of culture-led urban regeneration strategies can secure or produce potential benefits such as improving city image, physical environment, welfare of city residents and attracting new business enterprises. This research has established that Newtown Cultural Precinct (NCP) shows great potential to stimulate economic growth, increase tourist visitation as well as regenerating the Johannesburg inner city. In this regard, the institutional stakeholders of Newtown believe that NCP has the potential to stimulate economic growth and urban regeneration. This notion is supported by the majority of tourists which confirmed that Newtown has regenerated the inner city of Johannesburg and surrounding areas (65%) and created positive perceptions (62%) of the Johannesburg inner city. The stakeholders

emphasized that it is too early to measure the economic growth of Newtown, however there are positive indications from potential business ventures to inspire Newtown in stimulating local economic growth. Fifty three percent of the tourists visiting Newtown showed a strong level of interest in spending money on various cultural and heritage products and services. Authorities in collaboration with business ventures should strengthen the core products in order to increase tourist visitation and expenditure as well as expanding other economic activities. Tourist visitation into Newtown increases every year with over 450 000 visitors attended events in Newtown in 2012.

Newtown Cultural Precinct is distinguished by stakeholders, as a 'catalyst project' for urban development, and conveys a strong positive message to the macro environment on how to regenerate the urban area or inner city through exploiting cultural tourism activities. The participants of the study perceive regeneration as an 'on-going process' that should be sustained in order to rejuvenate the Johannesburg inner-city. It is foreseeable that after a series of suggested projects and programs in Newtown are completed the district will become a 'spectacle place', 'business district' and a leading 'cultural hub' in Johannesburg and Southern Africa. Tourism has been perceived as part of the solution for the urban problems experienced in the Johannesburg inner-city. The institutional stakeholders of Newtown placed emphasis on the fact that Newtown is perceived as a 'playground' due to the fact that the district caters for every type of tourist market regardless of travel motivations, gender, age group and tourist generating region.

The stakeholders of Newtown emphasised that in spite of the reality that the Gauteng provincial government contributes 70% of the annual budget via the Blue IQ and JDA, and 30% come from private property owners and tenants in a form of voluntary levies, financial constraints remain a challenge. In

order to mitigate financial constraints the stakeholders of Newtown endeavor to attract enough public-private investors and new business ventures into the district of Newtown. The district of Newtown is not legislated and is voluntary district that contribute funds in a form of voluntary levies.

### **Tourist motivation and experiences**

The district of Newtown consists of different tourism resources such as primary elements (e.g. museums, art, galleries & entertainment venues or halls) and secondary elements (e.g. restaurants & shopping facilities). It is very important to acknowledge that visitors to Newtown have distinctive motivations and expectations. The district of Newtown caters for different types of tourist markets depending on the type of products on offer during a particular season. In this study the majority of the tourists visiting Newtown regard factors such as safety and security (69%), accessibility (51%) as well as clean and friendly environment (47%) as 'very important' aspects to consider when deciding to visit Newtown. The friendly environment as well as the safety and security of Newtown add to the attractiveness of Newtown. Accessibility and the general appearance of the district serves as other 'important' draw-cards for factors visitors to Newtown considered when deciding to visit.

The most important motivations tourists listed for visiting Newtown was experiencing, exploring, learning, socializing and relaxing while attending music festivals or events, business meetings and conferences gave the tourists a feeling of 'sense of place'. The majority of the tourists visiting the district of Newtown have motivations to experience (45%), attend music festivals or watch plays (30%), explore the place (23%), socialise and relax (20%), feel the atmosphere of a place (19%) and to learn (14%). The variety of cultural

and heritage music events, festivals, concerts, art, plays and exhibitions hosted within Newtown have the ability to create unique and authentic atmosphere which in turn forms a certain identity or image of the district of Newtown as a tourist destination.

The majority (64%) of the visitors to Newtown indicated that their expectations were met with 58% of the visitors indicating that they were highly satisfied with the cultural and heritage products or services offered in Newtown. Fifty six percent of the participants indicated that they would definitely re-visit Newtown in the near future. Ivanovic (2008) believes that cultural tourism products are capable of creating an authentic sense of a place which ultimately results in the formation of a memorable destination image. According to Hayllar and Griffin (2005) and Griffin and Hayllar (2009) a new direction of research is emerging which focusses on the ways in which tourists experience urban precincts and understand the key attributes of the precinct.

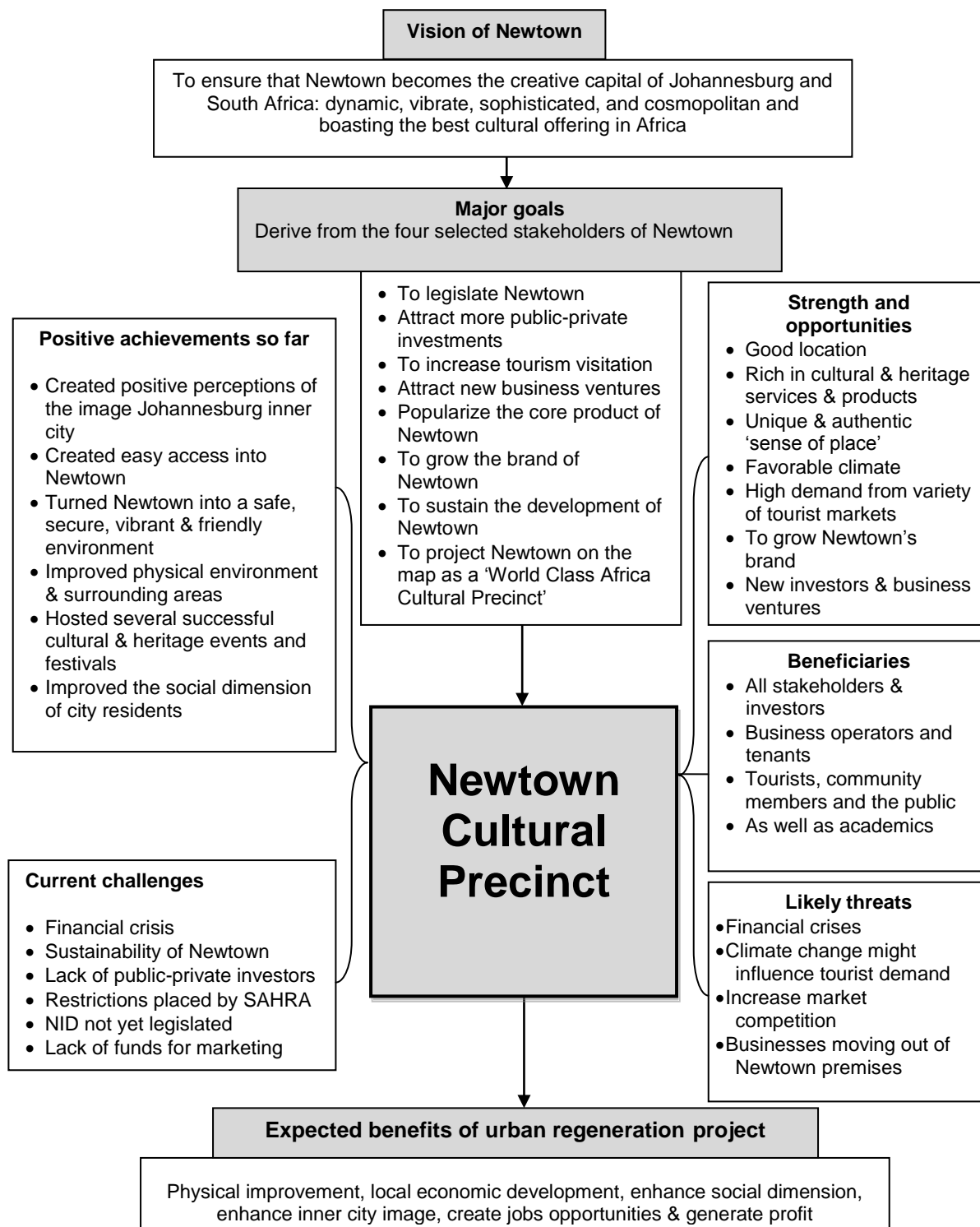
The study has established that the key attributes of Newtown Cultural Precinct such as *'friendly environment'*, *'sense of a place'* and *'safety and security'* has contributed to the overall satisfaction and meaningful experiences of the tourists visiting the district. The majority of the visitors to the district of Newtown are satisfied with the clean and friendly environment (69%), safety and security (87%), the standard of products and service quality as well as the atmosphere of the place.

Seventy-four percent of the domestic travelers interviewed in Newtown reside in the Gauteng province from areas such as Ekurhuleni (East Rand), Pretoria central, Johannesburg central, Soweto and Midrand. As far as the international travelers interviewed are concerned all the foreign visitors came from the UK, USA, Germany and Australia.

Tourists consulted a variety of different sources of information prior to their visit such as friends and family, local brochures, internet and word of mouth. Sixty three percent of the tourists visiting Newtown were between 16 to 35 years of age, while 37% were above 36 years of age.

The *'environmental bubble'* is referred to the familiar environment where tourists feel secure and comfortable in the company of people speaking the same language and having similar expectations (Ivanovic, 2008). According to the results the majority of the tourists visiting Newtown Cultural Precinct travels in small groups because they want to be comfortable and feel secure in their own *'environmental bubble'* with the people they know that speak the same language, have the same cultural background and have similar expectations.

A theoretical framework of the current state of the Newtown Cultural Precinct its vision, major goals, strengths, opportunities, achievements, challenges, beneficiaries, threats as well as expected benefits of the urban regeneration project is depicted in Figure 1.



**Figure 1:** Theoretical framework of the current state of the Newtown Cultural Precinct

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Urban-Cultural tourism has the capability to rejuvenate the inner city through the creation of an authentic sense of a place which in turn creates an unique destination image (Ivanovic, 2008). The potential of tourism to stimulate urban development strongly depends on the presence of tourism resources that can be developed into a consumable product or tourist attraction as well as on the financial capacity of public and private partners to strengthen and increase tourist facilities, infrastructure and activities. This study has proved that the Newtown Cultural Precinct has great potential to stimulate urban regeneration, local economic development as well as attracting greater number of tourists into the Johannesburg inner city. The study achieved its objective to understand the role the Newtown Cultural Precinct (NCP) plays as a tool for urban regeneration. While the institutional stakeholders of Newtown have distinctive goals, roles and responsibilities; they work towards the same purpose of rejuvenating the inner city and transforming Newtown to become a successful and leading 'cultural hub' in Johannesburg and Southern Africa. The success of Newtown Cultural Precinct is dependent on the collective effort and commitment from all major stakeholders actively involved into the project. In spite of the reality that the stakeholders of Newtown face a range of

challenges, the district has achieved some of the potential benefits of urban regeneration such as improving physical environment, lifestyle of city residents and creating positive perceptions of the image of Johannesburg inner city.

A number of authors (McCarthy, 1998; Hughes, 1999; Keyser, 2002) emphasised the fact that it is very important to establish linkages and partnerships in order to achieve greater goals of urban economic regeneration within large cities. The success of Newtown will take a collective effort from all the Newtown Improvement District (NID) members and stakeholders. The NID provides facilitation support to all the Newtown stakeholders, it is recommended that a new initiative through public-private investors should be implemented to establish strong linkages and partnerships. The suggestion does not ignore the current effective joint venture between the Gauteng provincial government, Blue IQ and JDA in providing support for the development and management of Newtown. The JDA and Blue IQ have been given responsibilities in terms of the development and management of Newtown. Nevertheless, developing public-private linkage and partnerships provides an opportunity for all the stakeholders and investors to work closely together in finding alternatives to minimise the current challenges and maximise the strengths of Newtown. This will help to project Newtown as a "world class African cultural precinct".

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